

Mayor's Column for April 7, 2010 Review

Last month the Local Government Institute (LGI) issued an 81 page report entitled "A Roadmap for Government Transformation." Evansville has been actively involved in the project.

LGI was formed in 2007 by the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, the Wisconsin Alliance of Cities, the Wisconsin Towns Association, and the Wisconsin Counties Association. While the founding organizations often have different/opposing views on local issues, the purpose of LGI is to conduct research, foster collaboration, and educate the public and policymakers on methods for improving local government's ability to serve the people.

LGI engaged accounting and consulting firm Baker Tilly Virchow Krause to study opportunities and challenges to improving local government organization, structure, and efficiency in Wisconsin. The project incorporates the past work of the Sheehy Commission, the Kettl Commission and others that focused on streamlining local government and fostering regional cooperation. The LGI project intends to coordinate with the Wisconsin Way initiative, an on-going effort to improve our state's economic competitiveness.

The key goals of the LGI study were to: determine whether having fewer local governments is more efficient and cost effective; understand how existing regional government organizations address local/regional interests to get things done; identify services that are proven to be delivered more efficiently with local government collaboration; and recommend ways to address local versus regional interests.

Main input for the LGI report was an on-line survey of local governments held in fall 2009 and a series of focus group meetings of local government officials. There were 910 survey responses.

Four focus groups of county, city, village, and town officials were held around the state in late 2009. I represented Evansville at the largest by-invitation-only focus group meeting, held in Madison on November 4, 2009. There were sixteen participants, including the mayors of Lancaster, Sun Prairie, Monona, Stoughton, and Evansville, the city manager of Whitewater, the city administrator of Lake Geneva, the village president of Potosi, the town chairs of Bristol and Springfield, the county board chairs of Dodge County, Grant County, and Portage County, a representative from the Wisconsin Department of Commerce, and LGI staff.

The focus group meeting I attended included discussion of budget issues that restrict the ability of local governments to provide citizen services. Some of the topics were: new state maintenance of effort legislation that adds restrictions on reducing budget expenses; revenue caps that often force service reductions; unfunded state mandates; the need to get school aid and municipal aid from different funding sources; and the property tax as a

disincentive for regional economic development cooperation (where business locates increases the tax base, and therefore, local government revenue increases).

Meeting participants discussed local examples of cooperation and collaboration. Attendees also identified barriers to shared delivery of services, such as jurisdictional boundaries that block cooperative endeavors, intergovernmental lack of trust based on past history, political turf issues, differing citizen service needs, and geographical proximity.

I would describe the focus group atmosphere as serious, determined about the necessity for change, and infused with a pervasive sense of frustration and urgency. There was great interest in the next steps of the LGI project and the recommendations that would come from the study.

Here are some of the basic findings of the recently-released LGI report. First, there was exploration of the perception that a reduction in the number of local governments in Wisconsin is required to reduce the cost of government. A review of data found that Wisconsin appears to be near the average in both the number of local governments and the local government expenditures per 1,000 of population. Additional analysis found that “from a purely fiscal perspective, it does not appear that eliminating layers of government is likely to lead to a reduced tax burden.” The report also points out municipal mergers in Wisconsin are very rare and that Wisconsin has a tradition of strong local control.

The report found that local outsourcing of certain services is used extensively as a tool for cost effectiveness. In Evansville, trash collection has been privatized. Joint action agencies and regional service delivery organizations such as public library systems and transit authorities are suggested as having potential benefits. In 2006, Evansville joined WPPI Energy, a joint action agency serving 50 municipalities, to provide better, more efficient electric service to citizens. Eager Free Public Library participates as part of the Arrowhead Library System, with a shared collection catalog and active interlibrary material loans.

Survey results showed that the top five current cooperative efforts of all types of local governments are fire protection, law enforcement, emergency medical services, planning and economic development, and public works/streets/highways. The number one reason for undertaking a collaborative service effort was service efficiency. Cost savings was listed as third in reasons for cooperation.

When cities were asked what services should be considered for consolidation, they identified public transportation, fire protection, public health, libraries, and emergency medical services as having the most potential. The mix of services changed somewhat when the question was posed to towns or counties.

The survey identified six primary success factors underlying all successful intergovernmental cooperation. They are: improved services; clear fiscal benefits; track

record of cooperation (trust); leadership; community support; and shared perception of need. Of particular interest, few cooperative efforts reduced operational expenditures significantly in the short-term. The largest fiscal benefits often were avoided costs in the mid- to long-term, particularly capital expenditures.

The “Roadmap for Government Transformation” identified a list of key action steps for the Local Government Institute. Many of the steps involve state legislative actions to change the fiscal environment directly impacting local governments. Currently, much state legislation encourages competition; local government collaboration will occur when state barriers to cooperation are removed and there is new effort to structure legislation that fosters intergovernmental collaboration. Much work will be necessary to move the state legislature in a new direction. “A Roadmap for Government Transformation” can be found on-line at www.localgovernmentinstitute.org.

U.S. Census Update

As of Monday, April 5, at 2:00 p.m., 70% of census questionnaires for the 53536 zip code had been returned. We have learned that at least one street in Evansville did not receive census forms. If you did not receive a questionnaire in the mail, there are scheduled hours for census assistance at Eager Free Public Library, 882-2260. You can also call the Census Assistance Office directly at (608) 327-5609.

Please complete and return your census questionnaire. It is important for funding allocations and establishing certain jurisdictional boundaries.

Discover Wisconsin Update

Final filming for the Discover Wisconsin Evansville episode will occur this month. Script and film editing will occur in May. The first airing of the Evansville show is scheduled for June 12 at 6:30 p.m. on WKOW-TV, Channel 27.

A family-friendly Summer Kick-off and Discover Wisconsin Premiere Party is planned for Thursday night, June 10, at Lake Leota. Our community will have the opportunity to be the first to see the show. Mark your calendars-you won’t want to miss it!

Community Announcements

We have received notification that the Arbor Day Foundation has named Evansville a Tree City USA for 2009. It is the ninth year our city has earned this national designation.

Yard waste pick-up is occurring this week, April 5-9. Scheduled yard waste pick-up is the first full week of each month, from April through October. Please remember to place debris in the terrace, not in the gutter where it can clog storm drains. The city dump is now open for the season for collection of yard waste. The hours are Wednesday evenings, 5:00 to 7:00 p.m., and Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

The winter power disconnection moratorium ends this month. If you are delinquent in your energy bills, please contact Evansville Water & Light at 882-2280 to arrange a payment schedule. Failure to do so can result in service disconnections beginning April 21.

The Grove Society has announced that the Evansville Visitor Center and Local History Museum will open Saturday, April 17, from 10:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. A dedication ceremony will occur at 2:00 p.m. The former Baker Office Building is located at the entrance to Leonard-Lake Leota Park, 15 Antes Drive.

Community Congratulations/Thanks

Evansville thanks Shelley Bisch, Mindy Roys, and the many community and parent volunteers for providing the wonderful theater experience for our youth. Faire Tales of Three will provide life-long memories of imagination and fun for our little ones. I know there were fairy princesses on Longfield Street in the late 1950s. Sparkly star-tipped magic wands spread light and smiles throughout the neighborhood. We must always cherish the delights of children.